

Sister act: Ismene in Sophocles' *Antigone*

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If you know anything at all about Sophocles' *Antigone*, then you probably know that it is about a young woman, Antigone, and her desperate struggle against the Theban king, Creon, as she tries to give her brother Polyneices the burial denied to him. But what of her sister, Ismene? What do you remember of Ismene's role in the play? Lyndsay Coo reaps the benefits of taking the sister seriously.

As the play opens, Antigone is talking to her sister. The Greek of her appeal is notoriously difficult to translate: a literal rendering would be 'O shared own-sisterly head of Ismene!' But modern translators have made it more fluent: 'Ismene, my own sister, dear Ismene' (H. D. F. Kitto), 'My own flesh and blood – dear sister, dear Ismene' (Robert Fagles), or 'My own sister Ismene, linked to myself' (Hugh Lloyd-Jones). At the start, Sophocles emphasizes the close bond between them, but as the play progresses, he has this relationship rapidly disintegrate. First, Ismene refuses to join in Antigone's plan to defy the public decree of their uncle Creon, the ruler of Thebes, and honour the body of their brother Polyneices with funeral rites. Then, when Antigone has been captured disobeying the order, Ismene makes a surprising appearance (line 526), claiming to support her sister. Antigone rejects her: 'I have no affection for a loved one who loves only in words' (543). Finally (581), both women are taken back inside the palace. Only Antigone re-emerges. As she goes to her death, she describes herself as 'the only one remaining from a line of kings' (941). For Antigone, Ismene no longer exists.

Girl trouble

If Ismene achieves nothing and is forgotten by the end of the play, why include her? The usual answer is that Sophocles sees her as a 'foil' to Antigone; that is, as a contrasting dramatic character, used to highlight just how unconventional Antigone's behaviour is. She is the meek, obedient, and – as far as an ancient Athenian audience is concerned – acceptable face of femininity to offset

Antigone's wilfulness. In the opening scene, for example, Ismene is reluctant: 'We must think of the fact that we are women, and so we cannot fight against men' (61–2), and states that, even though she agrees that Polyneices ought to be buried, 'I shall obey those in authority. It's a foolish thing to act to excess' (67–8). This attitude contrasts strongly with Antigone's determination to honour Polyneices at all costs. Sophocles was clearly interested in drawing a sharp contrast between them, and in his *Electra* he creates a similar dynamic between the stubborn heroine and her pragmatic sister Chrysothemis.

But Antigone does not need Ismene to expose her behaviour as unfeminine. This is spelled out to us many times throughout the play. Indeed it never occurs to Creon that it might have been a woman who buried Polyneices: when the Guard tells him that someone has sprinkled dust over the corpse, he asks

What are you saying? What man was it who dared to do this? (248).

In the great confrontation between Creon and Antigone, he tells her:

So long as I live, a woman shall not rule (525).

Later he advises his son Haemon:

We must never be beaten by a woman. It's better, if necessary, to fall at the hand of a man, and then we would not be called inferior to women. (678–80).

Even without Ismene, there could have been no doubt that Antigone's behaviour was unacceptable and contrary to normative gender roles.

Taking Ismene seriously

The reason for Ismene's inclusion might lie less within the confines of the play than with Greek mythology more broadly. For here, she is anything but a wall-flower. In one story, told by the elegiac poet Mimnermus back in the seventh century B.C. and depicted in archaic art, Ismene was killed by Tydeus – one of the warriors who had attacked Thebes along with Polyneices – while she was in bed with her lover. The mythographer Pherecydes (5th century B.C.) adds that Tydeus killed her at a fountain, which was then named after her. And in another mythological variant, told by Ion of Chios, a contemporary and friend of Sophocles, she was burned to death, together with Antigone, in the temple of Hera by Laodamas, the son of their other brother Eteocles. Sophocles' decision to include her is anything but incidental: Ismene comes with her own history that demands that we rethink Sophocles' choices.

Do this, and we might argue that Ismene is not as passive as she has often been characterized. She does change her mind and try to help Antigone, even if her sister rebuffs her. Creon certainly assumes that she is capable of plotting against him:

And you, the one who was drinking up my life-blood like a viper hiding in the house without my noticing; I did not realize that I was rearing up two plagues and two rebellions against the throne (531–3).

Ismene tries desperately to influence him and Antigone: she pleads with her sister to let her share in her death, and then reminds Creon that his son Haemon is betrothed to Antigone, asking how he can bear to kill his own child's fiancée. Indeed it is striking that the only concern and affection for Haemon in the play is voiced by Ismene and not his intended:

Dearest Haemon, how your father dishonours you! (572).

Some editors and translators have assigned this line to Antigone (wanting to find at least some evidence that she cares about him), but it is clear that it must be Ismene who speaks it, since at this point

she is engaged in line-by-line dialogue – *stichomythia* – with Creon. She is still standing as the play closes. This is an achievement in itself: the whole family – Oedipus, Jocasta, Polyneices, Eteocles, Antigone, Haemon, and Eurydice – have perished, overwhelmed by tides of terrible suffering. In contrast, by keeping her head down at the right moment and recognising the limits of her ability, Ismene's more sensible approach has led to her survival, even though we might wonder what will now become of her: as Ismene says earlier in the play,

*What life would there be for me
alone, without her [Antigone]?
(566).*

We are family

The inclusion of Ismene allows Sophocles to explore a further family relationship within a tragedy that is all about family relationships: the bond between sisters. It is easy to overlook this since the text is dominated by other relationships – whether Antigone's devotion to the memory of her dead brother (and father) or the breakdown of the bond between father (Creon) and son (Haemon). But sisterhood is the very first relationship to be mentioned and dramatized in the play, and is important for having the audience think hard not just about Antigone's duty to Polyneices but about this duty as a sister's duty.

Although Antigone famously claims to have been 'born to share in love, not to share in hatred' (523), these words ring rather hollow when we witness how she cruelly rejects and even taunts Ismene. Antigone is indeed a devoted sibling, but only to her dead brother. Is this further evidence of Greek patriarchy, and/or of the misguidedness of her actions? Certainly, Antigone's resolve to honour Polyneices and her willingness to die in the process is made all the more remarkable when we compare it to her treatment of Ismene.

Sophocles was a master of his craft, and he would not have created a character without good reason, or simply for the purpose of dramatic contrast. Ismene is not a passive, pathetic character. Rather than letting her be overshadowed by Antigone, we should see Ismene as a figure crucial to this tragedy's exploration of the themes of sense, survival, and family.

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